

Long Live the King! But what happens when the King of Thailand dies?

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Thailand's stability and prospects for the future are held in place, many would say, by the slender thread of one remarkable 79-year old man. He is credited with seeing the country through crisis after crisis, he is worshiped by most of his people and the country's politicians cross his loyal retainers at their peril.

Last September's coup against former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, done in his name by royalist generals, was just the latest instance of his long shadow. But one day King Bhumibol Adulyadej will die.

"Things might be OK in Bangkok while the king is alive, but what happens when he dies?" a 63-year-old Thai said quietly in a private conversation. Like most Thais, this man speaks of the king in whispers for fear of social reprisals or even jail time. "That's why the coup was bad. It sets a bad example for the future, when the king isn't around to hold things together."

His health is a subject of much speculation and concern. In July, thousands lined the streets to wish him well after undergoing surgery for lumbar spinal stenosis. He has largely stayed out of public view since then. In his annual birthday speech on 5 December he mentioned that his "physical strength" did not permit him to stand for the occasion, even though mentally he was "fit enough."

After more than 60 years on the throne, he is the one constant in Thailand's political life, a mortal deity whose calm demeanor seems to hover above the fray. Since 1946 Bhumibol has outlived 13 constitutions, 16 successful or attempted coups and 26 prime ministers. He has witnessed the remarkable transformation of Thailand from a backwater of superstition and poverty to a modern economy.

"The country will never be ready for the king to die," said a lifelong bureaucrat who has served under eight prime ministers. "This is sensitive to talk about, but it's a very real subject. A period of great instability is coming."

The love for their king is real among Thais. It's hard to imagine that deep-rooted respect for the institution of the monarchy changing even with Bhumibol out of the picture. As Paul Handley spells out in his book *The King Never Smiles*, royalists have gone to great pains to deify the king, and the decades of work that went into restoring the once-peripheral Thai monarchy into a central pillar of political legitimacy will not be undone overnight.

But although an American-born, foreign educated boy has been turned into a Buddhist Dhamma king, the presence of a god-like monarch has also retarded the growth of the country's political and judicial systems. This was evident in the turmoil leading up to the 19 September coup.

When publisher Sondhi Limthongkul, certainly attuned to the feud between the premier and the palace, started his campaign to unseat Thaksin, he distributed yellow T-shirts bearing the words "We Will Fight for the King"— even though no casual observers could see a threat to the throne. Soon

after, royalist academics started debating whether the king could use a vague clause in the constitution to oust Thaksin and appoint a prime minister.

By the time Thaksin called an early election in February 2006, the leading opposition Democrat party announced it would boycott the election, and it called on Bhumibol to appoint a new prime minister.

Bhumibol finally swooped down from the heavens on April 25, calling on the country's judges to "solve the problem" created by a boycotted election. Within two weeks, obedient judges voided the poll, which was easily won by Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party. Then the three highest courts, with no legal mandate other than Bhumibol's backing, called on the members of the election watchdog commission to resign. When the commissioners refused, claiming that the judges had no legal right to bully them out, the palace-backed courts quickly found them guilty of malfeasance and denied them bail for the sole purpose of removing them from office.

As that bizarre legal battle played out, an even stranger fight took place between Thaksin and the king's top adviser, retired general and former prime minister Prem Tinsulanonda, chair of the Privy Council.

Thaksin knew that a coup plot was in the works and tried to warn the world of his impending doom. In a letter to US President George W Bush dated June 23, Thaksin wrote: "Having failed to provoke violence and disorder, my opponents are now attempting various extra Constitutional tactics to co-opt the will of the people." In a speech to bureaucrats on June 29, he said that "highly influential people"—widely seen as a reference to the Privy Council or others surrounding the throne—wanted to depose him. But the public lashed out at Thaksin for even suggesting such a thing, no matter how true it may have been.

Prem proceeded to dress up in full military garb and give a series of speeches to the various armed forces. He repeatedly said that soldiers should not be loyal to a government, but to the king. Many saw it as a green light for the generals to seize power.

Prem is widely viewed as the mastermind behind the putsch and Bhumibol met with the coupmakers hours after they rolled tanks into Bangkok, legitimizing the coup in the eyes of the public. He also gave his unconditional support for the military-installed government led by Surayud Chulanont, who was also a member of the Privy Council at the time of the coup. By some accounts, Bhumibol prevented a second coup recently by declining to respond to requests from some in the junta who wanted to do away with Surayud's government.

While the traditional elite and many democratic activists may have seen Thaksin as a threat—and rightfully so—it remains to be seen if the monarch's sway over the Thai public will be passed on to his only son, Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn. As much as Thais love and trust their king, the prince is a different story.

Prince Vajiralongkorn, a 54-year-old former air force pilot, is more feared than respected. His reputation is that of a womanizer and a thug and he has proved a constant embarrassment to the image-obsessed palace. Naked pictures of Vajiralongkorn's latest wife, Srirasmi Akharaphongpreecha, were so widely distributed that palace officials warned local journalists that they would be arrested if caught emailing them to friends.

"I'd like to see what happens in movie theaters if the prince becomes king," said a veteran Thai journalist, referring to the way Thais stand to honor Bhumibol in cinemas before a film.

The distaste for the prince is countered by widespread respect for Bhumibol's second daughter,

Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. She is seen as having the kingly virtues of her father, and many observers say she would unify the country more than the prince.

But mind you, none of this is ever discussed openly. Lese-majeste laws make doing so a crime and thus the fate of the Chakri Dynasty - Bhumibol is the Ninth King in the current line is hidden behind closed palace doors that have more in common with the Middle Ages than the globalized world of Internet gossip.

Succession is still up in the air, although many believe a public relations campaign is unfolding to position the prince as Bhumibol's inevitable successor. The 1924 Palace Law of Succession is based on primogeniture and bars women from serving as monarch, but later amendments have opened the door for a princess. Section 23 of the 1997 Constitution said that if the king does not appoint a successor, then the Privy Council must submit the name of either the prince or the princess to serve as monarch. The choice would need to be approved by the National Assembly.

But the coupmakers tossed out the 1997 charter, so it's unclear how the next monarch will be decided. Some say the king may abdicate in favor of his son or daughter, which would ensure a smoother transition once he passes away. Many Thais may also be more willing to accept the prince if the king appoints him while he's still alive.

Helping the prince's case is that his 36-year-old wife had a baby boy, Dipangkara Rasmijoti, in April 2005. Although the prince has four sons with a previous common law wife, Dipangkara was the first to be considered a legitimate heir, ensuring that the royal line would continue. Princess Sirindhorn, 51, has never married and has no children, even though she could presumably still name Dipangkara as an heir if she were to take the crown.

"Some people think that while promoting Sirindhorn may help keep peace in the short term, it would not be good for the dynasty," said a Western diplomat. "The crown prince establishes a direct line to the king. Once that direct line is broken, then things get more complicated."

Either way, like most other things here, secrecy will prevail. It's also unclear which generals would have the most sway in the process and on the face of it the princess has shown no desire to succeed her father, even if the public may want that.

Prince Vajiralongkorn has attempted to refurbish his image lately, doing charity work and visiting victims of violence in the restive southernmost Muslim-majority provinces. Earlier this month, he piloted a commercial airliner from Bangkok to Chiang Mai on a charity flight to raise money for groups working in the Muslim south. About 112 VIP guests paid for a seat, and the trip raised 80 billion baht in total for charity.

The prince has also taken over some of the king's duties after the coup. In October, he presided over the opening of the legislature, the first time the king has not done so. Last month, he chaired the first meeting of the people's assembly that will draft a new constitution, which is normally a duty reserved for the king.

Although many academics and editorialists initially greeted the coup as a necessary evil to restore a democracy that Thaksin broke, others saw it as simply removing an obstacle to royal succession. They say Thaksin had not only built the most popular political party in Thai history, but he also helped finance the jet-setting ways of the prince and other royals. Ousting Thaksin ensures that he does not hold sway over the prince in the future.

Moreover, getting rid of the 1997 constitution means the rules of the game can be altered to prevent the rise of another Thaksin-like populist. Some believe the coup plotters will make it much easier for

lawmakers to switch parties, bringing the country back to the 1990s, when weak coalition governments were often toppled by just a small group of lawmakers. This could ensure that the military and the monarchy can quickly neutralize any too-ambitious politicians by meddling via backdoor power networks.

Thongchai Winichakul, a student leader in the bloody pro-democracy protests of October 1976 and now a professor at the University of Wisconsin, best articulated this in a paper widely distributed in the days after the coup. To guarantee the "special role of the monarchy in social and political life," he argued, the royalists needed three things: a popular heir, an "obedient, even submissive" government, and a powerful Privy Council that can act as kingmaker in the eyes of the public.

"Thaksin threatened the royalist plan," he wrote. "To the royalists, he seemingly sought to adopt for himself the role of kingmaker. The royalist coup consolidates power to General Prem and the royalists, putting their plan on track. Will Thailand return to democracy under the guidance of an unelected Privy Council? The constitution that the royalists put in place will reveal the character of government and parliamentary system they have in mind... The coup is not as much about toppling Thaksin as for 'Premocracy.'"

The past few months have revealed the crucial role Prem plays in balancing out various competing military factions. The most public rift has been that between former army commander and prime minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh and General Saprang Kalayanamitr, a hard-line soldier in line to replace coup leader Sonthi Boonyaratglin as army chief next October.

Following the Bangkok bombings on New Year's Eve, local media reported that Saprang called Chavalit "Thaksin's lackey" and suspected him of orchestrating the blasts. Chavalit, a former deputy prime minister under Thaksin, responded by taunting Saprang, accusing him of "gross incompetence" for not arresting the bombers after claiming he knew their identities.

This prompted Prem to work the phones in an effort to keep the boys in step. After Chavalit met his good friend Prem recently, he reportedly agreed to stop his public attacks on the junta.

The nature of the military makes it impossible to know the motives for one group of generals to turn against another group. The Bangkok Post, for example, reported earlier this month that Chavalit was mad at coup leader Sonthi because he failed "to show up at Gen Chavalit's residence to wish him a Happy New Year in person." One can only imagine how much trouble the country would be in if the military is split on Bhumibol's successor.

Combine the sensitivities of generals with those forces, however quiet now, that are opposed in principle to the idea of monarchy, and things could get even more chaotic. Without a doubt, Bhumibol's passing will provide a window of opportunity for anti-monarchists to start demystifying the palace. On this point, analysts recall the events of October 6, 1976. Students had gathered at Thammasat University to protest the return of Field Marshal Thanom Kitikhachorn, a military dictator who pro-democracy demonstrators had forced into exile following a bloody police crackdown on October 14, 1973.

On October 5, 1976 right-wing newspapers had published a photo of Thammasat students reenacting the lynching of two student protestors by police the previous month. The photograph, later found to be doctored, bore a strong resemblance to Prince Vajiralongkorn. The conservative generals soon pounced on the protestors for this terrible act of lese-majeste. Soldiers proceeded to rape, mutilate and kill hundreds.

"The influential people in society have kept people stupid and ill-informed for decades," said a

former lawmaker in Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party, speaking on condition of anonymity. "They are just taught from early on to say mai pen rai (no problem) all the time. And it's proven successful for the elites. But it doesn't have to be that way. Once the seeds are sown, then society can become more enlightened. There are several people with stature across party lines who feel the same way."

Thailand is often said to have become a democracy when Field Marshal Phibunsongkhram and civilian leader Pridi Phanomyong launched a coup that upended the absolute monarchy on June 24, 1932. But for most of the last 75 years, unelected generals have held power, often with the support of the king.

The hopes that the generals who ousted Thaksin would install a much better democracy look more remote by the day. Just this month, the junta called a meeting of broadcast media to bully them into not reporting messages from Noppadol Pattama, the ousted premier's lawyer. An interview Thaksin gave to CNN was blacked out by government censors here. Many also expect the generals to dissolve the Thai Rak Thai party in a politically motivated court case. The military leaders, taking a cue from Prem, still insist on promoting vague notions of "unity" and "Thainess" at all costs.

While the king will always be number one in the hearts of the rural poor, Thaksin may come in a distant second. This has potentially dire consequences for the royalists when Bhumibol dies. Thus, the military government is trying to portray Thaksin as a villain, and most of his popular economic programs are being rebranded under the king's intentionally vague "sufficiency economy" philosophy. Formal charges against Thaksin are expected soon. This is all good news for those who feared that a powerful Thaksin in a post-Bhumibol Thailand would prove much worse than any alternative scenario.

"For some there is relief that the country is now under the control of the traditional elite rather than Thaksin's business elites," a diplomat said. "But how things will actually play out when the king dies is anyone's guess."

Neither Thaksin nor Prince Vajiralongkorn nor anyone else will be able to fill the massive vacuum left when Bhumibol passes on. But that doesn't mean they won't try. And that's what makes it all the more important for Thailand to build proper democratic institutions. The alternative is instability, rumors, innuendo, restraints on civil liberties and potential bloodshed.

As renowned scholar Sulak Sivaraksa, a serial lese-majeste offender, told an audience at Thammasat University in April of last year: "Any monarchy that is democratic, possesses limited power, and is mindful of the ethical norms of the contemporary world will treat the people as the ruler of the land, even if they are fallible. The monarchy will thus continue to exist under the constitution. But if the monarchy is arrogant and hardboiled, works closely with the military, conceitedly stands above the citizens, looks down on the people, and dislikes progressive intellectuals (who again are all fallible), royal power will be used to obstruct changes, thereby jeopardizing the viability of the monarchy. The monarchy will be sowing the seeds of its own destruction."

P.S.

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